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Review of *William H. Ashley: Enterprise and Politics in the Trans-Mississippi West* By Richard M. Clokey

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William H. Ashley: Enterprise and Politics in the Trans-Mississippi West. By Richard M. Clokey. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. 305 pp. \$18.95.

Richard Clokey's biography of William Ashley is the product of fifteen years of research. The time was well spent; this is a thorough, perceptive, and interesting study of a man who played an important role in the early development of the American West. Perhaps more could have been made of Ashley in the existential sense, giving the reader more insight into his personality, but as a historian (and not a psychohistorian) Clokey understandably chose to emphasize the public rather than the private man. Still, Ashley emerges from his actions as a man who "sought respect and admiration and . . . projected the image as a leader

of men, able, restrained, responsible, and in command" (p. 52).

Ashley's role in the fur trade is well-known, thanks to the research of the late Dale Morgan. Clokey's main achievement is to place this segment of Ashley's life in the context of the years that preceded and followed it. What materializes is a depiction of Ashley as a "Jacksonian Man," the type whom Richard Hofstadter described as "an expectant capitalist, a hard working ambitious person for whom enterprise was a kind of religion."

Ashley was born in Virginia in 1778 to a family of modest means. As a young man he moved west in two steps: first to Kentucky in 1798 and then on to the Missouri lead meaning region of St. Genevieve in 1802. There he took advantage of every opportunity to advance himself, engaging in lead mining, the gunpowder trade, and land speculation. He took risks and showed imagination in all his dealings, but he stretched his credit thin and was constantly assailed by debtors. In frontier Missouri this was no blemish to his reputation, and he was elected lieutenant governor of the state in 1820 and appointed general in the state militia in 1821. Ashley's main ambitions were social and political. The economic enterprises were simply means to an end.

In 1821, when the St. Louis fur trade revived, following the period of disruption during the war with Great Britain, Ashley joined in the competition for the furs of the upper Missouri. His plans disintegrated in 1823 when the Arikara attacked his party, leaving twelve men dead and the rest demoralized. With characteristic ingenuity, Ashley improvised and dispatched a group of trappers overland on a direct route to the central Rockies. In the course of the next four years Ashley founded the rendezvous system and earned a fortune from the fur trade. Unlike many of his men, Ashley had no love for the rigors of life on the Great Plains and in the Rocky Mountains. Consequently, having secured his financial position, Ashley withdrew from trapping operations in 1827 to concentrate on the safer business of supplying the fur

trade and fulfilling his political ambitions.

Ashley became the "elder statesman" of the fur trade. By the mid-1830s he was regarded as one of the most informed advocates of western expansion, and he was often used by the government as a consultant on such matters as the British presence in Oregon. His efforts were rewarded when he was elected to Congress in 1831. He served three terms in Washington, accomplishing more than any other Missouri representative in this era. These were the happiest years of his life—he had attained the wealth, social position, and respect that he had craved.

Ashley returned to Missouri in 1836 and immediately engaged in large-scale land speculation. However, he died suddenly in 1838, a victim of pneumonia. Obituaries lauded his rise from humble beginnings, his perseverance through periods of ill fortune, and his eventual success as businessman and politician. Clokey presents Ashley as a man who had the courage and intelligence to capitalize on the opportunities offered by early nineteenth-century frontier society. Although further work may remain to be done on the details of Ashley's life, Clokey's book obviates the need for another biography.

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