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**Review of *The New Western History: The Territory Ahead* Edited
by Forrest O. Robinson**

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The New Western History: The Territory Ahead.
Edited by Forrest G. Robinson. Tucson: Uni-
versity of Arizona Press, 1998. Index. 218 pp.
\$40.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

“The New Western History is now old
enough to have a history,” observes Jerome
Frisk, lead essayist of *The New Western His-
tory: The Territory Ahead*. Apparently it is also

influential enough to interest scholars outside the discipline of history. The seven contributors to this volume, representing literary studies, American studies, and natural resource management, evaluate the core texts of the New Western History's "Gang of Four": William Cronon, Patricia Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster. These historians are known for their objections to the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose "frontier thesis," they argue, told a one-sided story of glorious progress. By contrast, their own pluralistic histories of the West highlight instances of violence, racism, class oppression, and environmental destruction. Instead of progress, the New Historians read conquest; instead of "happy face history," they write sober, even dour-faced accounts.

Taken together the essays in this collection evaluate New Western History in terms of its treatment of past historians, literature, gender, race, popular culture, postmodern theory, and nature, finding it problematic in all areas. For example, Jerome Frisk questions the so-called newness of New Western History, contending that earlier historians such as Wallace Stegner anticipated their emphasis on conflict, conquest, and tragedy. Forrest Robinson likewise undermines the New Western Historians' claims to originality, arguing that not only have they failed to credit earlier historians, they've misrepresented Turner himself and, worse, neglected the Western *literary* tradition, which tells a story of resistance that "the revisionists claim to be telling for the first time." Krista Comer agrees with Robinson that the literature that New Western Historians jettison as mere "myth" ought to be taken seriously because it tellingly reveals the interconnections of sexuality, gendered experience, and history. Carl Gutterrez-Jones takes singular aim at Patricia Limerick, faulting her for conflating race and ethnicity and for treating all races as having had "comparable traumatic experiences," thus erasing crucial social and cultural distinctions.

While Robinson and Comer berate New Western Historians for their failure to read

"high" literature, Stephen Tatum argues that they've *misread* popular literature as reinforcing the status quo, when, as current theory explains, popular works often contain "a coded *critique* of an emerging corporate order." In the final essay, natural resource management historians Sally Fairfax and Lynn Huntzinger criticize New Western History for portraying nature and region in ways that are ecologically uninformed and imprecise; nevertheless, they admire New Western History for its commitment to public discourse and for presenting historical facts in the form of accessible stories.

These essays are smart, persuasive, and stimulating. I wish they were friendlier. While the book's stated intent is to "advance the lively and very important discussion that the New Western Historians have helped to set in motion," its effect may be to alienate the disciplinary camps.

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