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Review of *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* By Patricia Nelson Limerick

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Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West. By Patricia Nelson Limerick. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000. Notes, index. 384 pp. \$26.95.

Stories matter.

That simple statement is at the heart of the now decades-old struggle between the “Old” and “New” Western histories. The stories people hear about their pasts contribute to the construction of both personal and collective identities. In other words, what we believe about who we are is, to a significant extent, determined by the stories we are told about where we came from. The dominant story of the past two centuries in American history has been the tale of the frontier—for most Americans, the “winning” of the West. It has become the creation myth of the United States. In *Something in the Soil*, Patricia Nelson Limerick continues her crusade, begun in *The*

Legacy of Conquest (1987), to change this national mythology.

Something in the Soil is a collection of essays, most of which (eleven of sixteen, by my count) have previously appeared elsewhere. Like all such collections, the book struggles to hold its various topics in one thematic grip. Limerick has divided the work into five parts with such titles as "Forgetting and Remembering" (part 1), "Beleaguered Great White Men" (part 2), and "The Historian As Dreamer: Preaching to (and by) the Half-Converted" (part 4). Each contains three or four separate essays loosely linked by brief prefatory remarks. The five sections together are preceded by an introduction in which Limerick explains her goal for the collection—to "provide a more-grounded and down-to-earth version of the history of the American West."

But, in all honesty, she wants to do much more than this. The overwhelming tone of the book is one of bemused frustration. Limerick doesn't just want to offer a more realistic version of history; she wants to construct a new mythology, a new master narrative of the American West. And the fact that she has not, despite more than a decade of trying, managed to disabuse Americans of the old mythology of the frontier, in which the good guys and bad guys were well-defined and open to limited interpretation, haunts her, it seems. There is a Quixotic feel to this collection; the reader emerges from the final full-length essay, the well-known "Dancing With Professors," wondering if Limerick hasn't spent enough time tilting at her Turnerian windmills, enough time growing more frustrated as her large and varied audiences repeatedly exhibit their unwillingness to give up the old stories.

Each and every essay in this collection is great reading. As anyone who has ever read her knows, Limerick tells fascinating stories. She is, as the dust cover blurb claims, "irreverent, enlightening, and always witty." Without a doubt, she has done more than anyone else in the field of American Western history to change the way the tales are told, the my-

thologies constructed. Not everyone may be listening, but Limerick should find some solace in having inspired a new generation of scholars to continue the quest, to keep challenging those old stories that have mattered so much to so many for so long.

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