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Review of The Encyclopedia of the Central West

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The Encyclopedia of the Central West. By Allan Carpenter. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1990. Introduction, illustrations, bibliography, index. 544 pp. \$35.00.

The objectives of this encyclopedia, as explained by the author in the introduction, are "to present the widest possible body of reference material on the Central West" and also "to offer a readable work, one to be dipped into for enjoyment as well as information" (5). There is no disputing the breadth of the coverage, which extends geographically from North Dakota to Texas and from Nebraska to western Colorado and topically from geology to tourism. Nor can it be denied that the entries are interesting. But conceptually the choice of area is open to dispute, and a close reading of a sample of entries reveals that the accuracy of the information may be queried.

The encyclopedia is organized alphabetically, with more than 2500 short entries and ten longer essays on the states involved. Good use is made of maps, statistics are up-to-date (though they will have to be revised after the 1990 census), and there is a large selection of black and white photographs (not all in focus) and reproductions of paintings by well-known artists. Many of the entries deal with individual people and places, and while one might quibble with selections (why is Lawrence Welk included but not Buddy Holly?) the coverage is quite comprehensive. The author deserves particular praise for the extensive coverage given to Native Americans, the original inhabitants of the area. There is an inadequate table of contents, a well-developed index, and a brief bibliography. The encyclopedia will probably be most

useful for a high school student beginning a research project or for the casual browser who picks it up off a (not too fancy) coffee table for a few moments' perusal.

But just what is the Central West? Apparently it is further west than the Midwest, which the author has already dealt with in an earlier encyclopedia. It is certainly not a region, as the author contends: western Colorado and western New Mexico have little in common with eastern Kansas. Rather, the Central West is just an arbitrary chunk of the United States with nothing more cohesive than contiguity justifying its designation as a region. The encyclopedia, therefore, has no conceptual power: the whole is definitely no more than the sum of the parts.

Presumably the first requirement of an encyclopedia is accuracy, and in this respect a few errors should be pointed out. It is doubtful, for example, that the Ponca inhabited northeastern Nebraska in the seventeenth century (375); Chief Blackbird of the Omaha, an absolute tyrant, certainly did not have "considerable success in preparing his people for the inevitable white takeover" (314); and how can it be said, after centuries of contact, that "until 1861 the plains Indians had few encounters with the white man" (223-24)? Whether these errors, drawn only from subjects which the reviewer knows best, are characteristic of the entire work remains to be seen.

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