

Power and Place in the North American West

Richard White and John M. Findlay, editors

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THE PUBLICATION in 1987 of Patricia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* was a benchmark in the writing of the history of the American West. Rejecting the influence of Frederic Jackson Turner, Limerick asserted boldly that the old emphasis on the uniquely American "process" by which the west was settled must give way to a new emphasis on the west as a "place," a place that should be studied in its own right and within a broadly comparative context. Writing what became known as the "new western history," she and others proceeded to explore a variety of neglected themes such as gender, racism, ethnic relations, and the environment. For Limerick the new approach, explored from a western perspective, suggested not a narrative of triumphant nation building but a "contest for property and profit ... accompanied by a contest for cultural dominance" (27). At the heart of western American history was a "legacy of conquest."

Power and Place in the North American West is a product of this new enthusiasm for the study of western American history. Originating as papers delivered at a symposium hosted by the Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest at the University of Washington in November 1994, this book emerged five years later as an

anthology of eleven essays loosely connected by the conference theme of exploring "the power of some places over others" (ix). The volume brings together work by some of the finest young scholars in the American West field, and it is edited by two of the field's leaders, Richard White, who has written the definitive general history of the American West, and John Findlay, the author of *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (1992).

In the Introduction to *Power and Place* the editors attempt to identify the contribution that the various chapters make to our understanding of power, but the eclectic range of meanings that are accorded the concept of power throughout the collection precludes easy generalization. In addition, while the editors note that several authors draw upon theoretical contributions by Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens to the study of power, such theoretical influence is limited. Indeed, theories of power are employed much less creatively in this volume than they are by Tina Loo, Cole Harris, and Bruce Stadfeld, all of whom write in the field of British Columbia studies.

The volume is more effective when its analytical focus is on place. In "Violence, Justice, and State Power in the New Mexican Borderlands, 1780-

1850," for example, James Brooks suggests that a borderlands political economy "organized around the seizure and exchange of human lives and livestock between New Mexicans and neighboring Indians" (24) dominated greater New Mexico for more than a century and a half. It ended when the American military and free-labour capitalism arrived. Place, Brooks suggests, is crucial to an understanding of the violent and competitive nature of this multiethnic borderland exchange economy. In another piece, William Deverell and Douglas Flamming give a new reading to an old subject when they explore the racial dynamics of boosterism in Los Angeles in the period to 1930. While promotional narratives about the city "often shared a language common to all western boosterism," they argue, "black and white boosters offered markedly different interpretations of Los Angeles and the American West" (118).

The strongest cluster of essays falls within the category of "Environment and the Economy." Hal Rothman studies tourist development at Sun Valley, Idaho, where the Union Pacific Railway Company opened a resort hotel in 1936. Sun Valley redefined itself in the 1960s when a new form of ski resort (based on seasonal homes) emerged. The study explores how tourism can transform meaning attached to space and concludes that, while "many locals become materially better off as a result of the tourist industry ... the benefits are often negated by the changed perceptions of themselves and their community" (198). By exploring timber management in Washington State's Gifford Pinchot National Forest (GPNF), Paul Hirt seeks to explain "the dramatic decline of timber harvesting of the national forests of the Northwest in the 1990s."

He takes as his starting point Judge Dwyer's 1991 decision to nearly halt timber sales from the GPNF until a credible plan was put forward to protect the spotted owl. Hirt proceeds to present a compelling case that the real cause of the shutdown was not the court decision about the spotted owl but, rather, the liquidation of the forest during a forty-year "conquest" – a period during which economic thinking, and "the grandly optimistic assumptions by scientists and technicians regarding their ability to control nature in order to maximize productivity," prevailed (207). While the spotted owl litigation may have brought down the house of cards, Hirt concludes, the industry was "destined to collapse on its own in due course" (224).

Finally, the essay by Joseph Taylor III presents a compelling analysis of the spatial relations of power in the management of the Oregon salmon fishery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In doing so, it offers the book's most sophisticated exploration of the relationship between power and place. Taylor suggests that Oregonians fragmented naturally integrated water systems into parts that were exploited by competing segments of the salmon industry. Fishing and cannery interests in a highly overcapitalized industry responded to the rush for spoils by attempting "to claim and regulate the spaces of rival interests" and bolster the declining fish stocks by embracing the panacea of hatcheries (234). The "spatialized politics of the salmon fishery" and the resulting fragmentation of nature predestined the collapse of yet another major resource extractive industry in the American Northwest.

There is much in *Power and Place* to inform British Columbians, particularly

those with an interest in issues of racism and the construction of racial identities, the history of tourism, the role of the state, and environmental history. The essays centre on the parts of the American West of most interest to British Columbians – the Northwest and the Pacific Coast. And one essay is specifically about British Columbia: John Lutz's study of the "Importance of Place" in the social construction of race. The volume offers a useful introduction to the work of a number of relatively new scholars who, in the last few years, have published major studies in the history of the American West. These authors include James Brooks (*Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands, 1660-1880*);

Chris Friday (*Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870-1942*); Hal Rothman (*Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West*); Paul Hirt (*A Conspiracy of Optimism: Management of the National Forests Since the Second World War*); and Joseph E. Taylor III (*Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis*). Only one essay in *Power and Place* focuses on gender, a curious fact given its importance as one of the categories of analysis that defines the "new western history" as "new." This is, nonetheless, an important book that merits the attention of readers interested in thinking about British Columbia's past from a comparative perspective.

*Women Who Made the News:
Female Journalists in Canada, 1880-1945*

Marjory Lang

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999.
371 pp. Illus. \$32.95 cloth.

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THIS LIVELY, intelligent history of Canada's women journalists is a pleasure to read; it is packed with fascinating information and provocative speculation. While few press histories acknowledge their significance, media women have been powerful influences, "integrally involved in defining normative roles for Canadian women – and not only for anglophone middle-class women like themselves but also ... for working class and immigrant women who looked to the

media for cues as they too were swept into the mainstream of consumer culture" (7). While the scribbling sisterhood occasionally laboured as journalists and editors earlier, the late nineteenth-century press's turn to commercial advertising and female consumers created unprecedented opportunity. Pioneers, often well educated, single, Canadian-born refugees from their sex's limited employment options, encountered active resistance even as they contributed to newspaper