

The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History

Carlos Arnaldo Schwantes

Revised and enlarged edition. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. 568 pp. Illus., maps. us\$25 paper.

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This is an expanded version of a book that was first published eight years ago. A survey text intended principally for the undergraduate market, *The Pacific Northwest* traces a little over two centuries of European colonization and settlement in the area that now comprises the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Although one might quibble with the author's description of the volume as "short" – not an adjective many people would use to characterize a book that runs to nearly 600 pages – it is never tedious. Writing synthetic overviews is not easy and Schwantes does an excellent job, succeeding in his self-appointed task of writing an "interpretive history of the Pacific Northwest ... [that] seeks main themes, paints with broad strokes, and engages in ... responsible reductionism" (xxi). Of course, such an ambitious project offers a reviewer numerous opportunities to protest that important topics have been ignored, that the coverage is superficial, or that the complex has been made to appear straightforward. But whatever reservations one might wish to register, overall the book is remarkably thorough and evenhanded.

Schwantes divides his study into five parts. Each begins with a short biography or vignette of an individual whose life, in the author's judgment, somehow captures a sense of the times. Thus the first section, "Isolation and Empire," opens with a brief chapter on James Cook, discussing the sig-

nificance of his third voyage to the region. Subsequent chapters describe "The First Pacific Northwesterners" as well as the dynamics of the fur trade, the section concluding that the era established "the role of the Pacific Northwest as a colony whose natural resources were ripe for outsiders to exploit ... [and] revealed economic attitudes and patterns that were to be replicated in the future" (79). The second part describes the first years of European settlement, from the 1840s through to the 1870s, opening with a profile of the Whitmans, a missionary couple killed in 1847. The key issues of this troubled era – the Oregon Treaty, the gold rushes, the Civil War, and race relations – receive their due in the chapters following the one on the Whitmans. This was, Schwantes argues, "a time for establishing boundaries. Not just the obvious ones like those that separated American from British territory ... but boundaries of mind and spirit as well" (142). The third section – the largest and most substantial in the book – examines the fundamental transformation described in its title, "From Frontier to Urban-Industrial Society." After a profile of Henry Villard – the person responsible for building the Northern Pacific Railroad, the region's first trans-continental – chapters examine the impact of railways, the nature of the resource economy, immigration and urbanization, and the gradual emergence of a distinctive regional culture.

The fourth section ("Progress and Its Discontents") begins with a profile of May Arkwright Hutton. A resident of the Coeur d'Alenes and author of a novel on the labour struggles of the region's hard rock miners, Hutton later became a millionaire as a result of her mining investments and tried to destroy the extant copies of her early literary work. This is followed by a very good chapter – as one might expect from this author – on organized labour, "The Commonwealth of Toil." The section then deals with some of the major themes of the period from the *fin de siècle* to the Depression: progressivism, the impact of the First World War, the region's shifting demographic structure, the 1930s economic collapse, and the New Deal measures. Some less obvious features of the period – for example, the origins of television and the role of the Ku Klux Klan – are also covered. The final section of the book opens with a profile of Tom McCall, governor of Oregon in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A pioneer environmentalist and advocate of controlled growth, McCall's tempestuous career is an excellent introduction to this section, with its chapters on the "Roller-Coaster Years," "The Politics of Anxiety and Affluence," and "Environment at Risk."

The book has many strengths: Schwantes is a sharp observer, and his attention never lags. His comments on the 1980s and early 1990s are as thoughtful as those in earlier sections of the narrative. He ranges over many themes – from a fascinating aside on the region's early land act (121) to the meaning and significance of Northgate Mall (439) – without ever seeming

ponderous or superficial. And the book itself is well-produced, with much illuminating detail in statistical tables (in addition to an appendix subtitled "A Statistical Portrait"), some fascinating photographs (a number of which were taken by Schwantes himself), and almost no typographical errors (a phrase printed twice on 125 was the only one that caught my eye).

In a way, the book's weakness springs from its chief strength. Schwantes' confidence and his ease with the material leave one a little uneasy; there is an inexorable sense of forward movement, an assumed logic to the narrative that masks a whiggish analysis. Intentionally or not, the reader is left with the feeling that this was not just the way it happened, but the way it had to happen. Schwantes seems little interested in contingency or choices: issues are more often described than they are explained (European occupancy of the region, the subordination of Native peoples to the "pioneers," the incorporation of the region into the territory of the burgeoning United States). Nor is there much discussion of "region" or even the problem of identifying the Pacific Northwest. It appears as a given, and its genesis – or definition, or invention – is never really discussed.

I suspect few scholars could write an overview as ambitious as this one and please everyone. While the treatment of some difficult historiographical issues is not all that satisfactory, this remains a very good book. It would be an excellent text for an undergraduate course on the region's history or, indeed, for any reader wishing an intelligent introduction to the subject.