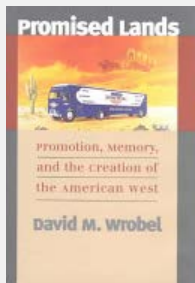


Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West

Submitted by nwharton on 1-1-2004 12:00 PM



Author: David M. Wrobel

Publishing: University Press of Kansas, 2002. Index, bibliography, endnotes, photos, drawings. xi + 322 pages. 6 x 9 inches. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer: Thomas J. Noel

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An important and memorable early twenty-first-century book on the West is this highly original re-examination of how westerners see themselves. As everybody knows by now, the West is a product of the imagination—a place where well-armed Americans rough it out in kingsize ranch houses and SUVs, wallowing in frontier fantasies while living in the most heavily urbanized region of America. David M. Wrobel, a history professor at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas, impressed scholars with his earlier book, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal*. This book adds to Wrobel's stature as one of the up-and-coming historians focused on the American West.

In *Promised Lands* Wrobel takes up two genres of literature usually scorned by scholars—booster promotional tracts and the reminiscences of old-timers. Promoters puffed the West as the Promised Land, downplaying problems of climate, terrain, and troublesome indigenous peoples. Pioneers, on the other hand, emphasized the problems and obstacles they heroically overcame.

Boosters transformed the western desert into a garden (i.e., marketable real estate), and the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, according to Wrobel, set the record for booster books by publishing 165,000 copies of Charles A. Lyman's *Fertile Lands of Colorado and Northern New Mexico*. The D&RG, Wrobel might have added, had an entire "literary department" devoted to cranking out not only guidebooks and promotional tracts but poems, postcards, photographs, and even fiction— anything to market the West to tourists and potential investors and settlers. Another D&RG booklet, *The Heart of the Rockies* (1890), proclaimed, that "the invalid of the east, with hollow eyes and shrunken faces" would find the cure in "the salubrious and health giving climate of these mountains and valleys." (p. 22) Thus did boosters dress themselves up as altruistic lifesavers.

Wrobel's book draws on thousands of such primary and secondary sources. His ninety-nine pages of "selective bibliography" and "notes" are rich reading in themselves. His exhaustive research unearths some gems like Yuma, Colorado's, 1890 prospectus boast to be "a town whose rapid progress seems to cause the sun, as it peeps over the morning horizon, to stop in astonishment." (p. 23)

Wrobel makes interesting connections, showing how land promoters turned Frederick Jackson Turner's

famous thesis on the closing of the frontier into a "buy now while there is still some left" campaign. He also notes that while promoting the West as a Garden of Eden, boosters never noted that the story of Adam and Eve was cautionary, not celebratory.

Mapping the Garden of Eden became a specialty of Rand McNally, a Chicago firm established in 1871. It issued seductive maps that highlighted attractions (cities, natural wonders, railroads) and played down the unattractive (deserts, Indian reservations). Creative and futuristic maps, which turned paper towns and railroads into major cities rich in rail connections, lured many west to isolated, middle-of-nowhere, would-be towns.

Wrobel notes that gold rush pioneers did not dwell on their materialistic motivations, on what Mark Twain called the "get rich quick disease." Rather, gold grubbers in later years claimed more noble motivations of civilizing and Christianizing the wilderness. In their fading years, the pioneers began organizing societies and issuing publications for the edification of future generations whose attention and respect they hoped to capture. The Society of Colorado Pioneers (1872), the Territorial Daughters of Colorado (1876), the Colorado Historical Society (1879), and the Sons of Colorado (1905) celebrated and glorified Colorado's founding (white) mothers and fathers. Certainly they saw Indians differently than we do now. "It is impossible for rising generations," Luella Shaw wrote in her 1909 *True History of the Pioneers of Colorado*, "to conceive but a remote idea of the privations and dangers from hostile Indians. ... Early settlers ... endured the hardships... for the sake of paving the way to our present civilization, where towns, cities and railroads have sprung into existence as if by magic." (p. 133) Pioneers, as epitomized by the Madonna of the Trail statues and Denver's Pioneer monument at Colfax and Broadway, were placed on pedestals as the center of the moral universe, as role models for the communities they founded.

Pioneers turned Indians into villains and whites into victims. The Indian raids, slaughters, scalping, raping and kidnapping of whites was played up with no mention that they were the aggressors dispossessing of indigenous peoples. Buffalo Bill Cody had Indians attack peaceful whites in his Wild West show. This tendency to forget who was disposing of whom makes it important to remember and create a national historic monument at the site of the Sand Creek Massacre.

Probably no one did a better job of collecting pioneer reminiscences than New Deal programs such as the Federal Writers Project and Civil Works Authority interviews with old-timers, including former slaves, Indians, and Hispanics. These New Deal researchers and writers not only compiled the best guidebooks ever done for most states but also left thousands of interviews as well as detailed manuscript reports on local communities, waterways, businesses, opera houses, churches, schools, and on everything from arroyos to zoos. These manuscripts occupy some thirty feet of shelf space at the Colorado Historical Society library, and presumably they can be found at similar organizations in other states with the same sort of exhaustive, systematic research on each state. Although part of the best single campaign ever launched to shore up local history, the New Deal writers, historians, artists, and researchers were often dismissed by the old-timers they interviewed as loafers looking for New Deal handouts.

Living up to pioneers' high expectations, like finding the illusory Edens promised by western promoters, was no easy task. Wrobel does a splendid job of examining the motivation and methods of the pioneers. The mythmaking continues with modern realtors advertising unspoiled wilderness real estate, thirty-five-acre ranchettes, and ridge-top log McMansions. Meanwhile, white settlers appropriating "Native" bumper stickers and license plates drive through the poor urban neighborhoods where the real natives—Indians and Hispanics—congregate, or head out onto the freeway looking for the "Old West" on weekends, or finding it in their suburban retreats at the end of the workday.

As Wrobel puts it, “If western mythology does not develop beyond its defining characteristics of white-centeredness and rural-centeredness” (p. 191), it will be increasingly irrelevant in the twenty-first century West, which is mostly urban and increasingly non-white.

Reviewer Info:

Thomas J. Noel, professor of history at the University of Colorado–Denver, is co-editor of the Colorado Historical Society’s online Book Review Center and a member of the Society’s Board of Directors. Noel writes the “Dr. Colorado” column for the Saturday joint issue of The Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News. His most recent publication is Honest John Shafroth: A Colorado Reformer, with Stephen J. Leonard and Donald L. Walker, Jr. (Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 2003).

Promotion, Memory and the Creation of the American West (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002, \$34.95). Pp. xi+322. ISBN 0 7006 1204 1. Abstract views reflect the number of visits to the article landing page. Total abstract views: 0 *. Loading metrics

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"Global West, American Frontier demonstrates why we need to know history. Understanding nineteenth-century travel narratives, guidebooks, and other 'mythologies' gives us a solid context for grasping our own issues today. This book is written with clarity and savvy." Ron Primeau, author of *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*. About the Author. David M. Wrobel holds the Merrick Chair in Western History at the University of Oklahoma. He is also the author of *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal and Prom...* Shrublands across the West are currently threatened by land uses such as urban sprawl, energy development, and agricultural development which impact ecosystem function through altered fire cycles, expansion of invasive species, modified hydrology, and intensified soil erosion. Historically, shrubland ecosystems have already been impacted by many of these same disturbances.Â Promised lands: promotion, memory, and the creation of the American West. Kansas: University Press of Kansas. 321 p. Promised Lands book. Read 2 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Whether seen as a land of opportunity or as paradise lost, the Americ...Â Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West" as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦| Want to Read.

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