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Book Review: Promise: Bozeman's Trail to Destiny

Michael Cassity

The transformation of the area along the Bozeman Trail through Wyoming and Montana in the 1860s provides a key to understanding the larger forces at work reshaping the American West in the late nineteenth century. The complex dynamics at work within the Native American cultures in the area and between them and the intruders hold a great potential for substantive historical inquiry. The present volume is a broad collection, a miscellany, of historical documents, personal reminiscences, and oral histories, as well as observations by professional historians; it even contains some fictional narratives drawing on the events at hand. Not surprisingly, mixing factual accounts with fictional speculation, mingling important and evocative historic photographs with colorful posed photos of modern “models,” and lacking a clear organization, the collection often seems to go everywhere and nowhere. The material seldom strays far from armed conflict, and the editor and contributors

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avoid approaching the subject with conceptual sophistication. One of the contributing historians, Susan Badger Doyle, does, however, touch on the illumination an imperial framework can provide in understanding the trail.

The important contributions in oral history from people like Douglas Spotted Eagle, Leona Buckman, Richard Tall Bull, and Tim Lame Woman are rich, detailed, poignant, and complex. They are also, however, given far less prominence and space than the editor's own contributions, such as, for one example, his first-person channeling of an individual involved in the “Hundred-Soldiers-Killed-Fight,” or Fetterman Fight, of 1866, or his “imagined account” of a woman traveler on the Bozeman Trail, for another. In contrast, the records presented by women and men who carry the oral histories of their families and nations provide much more revealing information about the various cultures and events they describe. The caution they bring to the task, the honest discussion of differing interpretations of the subjects at hand, and the details of their stories make these oral histories valuable documents that add to the literature but which are cheapened by being placed up against the editor's own fictional accounts.

The book is a valuable contribution to historical literature when it presents the documents relating to the issues surrounding the Bozeman Trail and the road it spawned, whether those documents be written, photographic, or oral, and is much less useful when it manufactures them.

MICHAEL CASSITY
Broken Arrow, Oklahoma