Book Review: Kansas and the West: New Perspectives

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It's hard to travel the highways and byways of the Great Plains saga without spending some time in Kansas. Conquistadors and cowboys, Indians and Exodusters—to say nothing of such luminaries in the pantheon of popular culture as Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, and Buffalo Bill Cody—join the intricate weave of the historical tapestry of Kansas. Frequently glanced at as a “passing through” place, Kansas is more accurately perceived as a locale where regions and peoples meet, mingle, and merge. It is, after all, in Kansas that watered prairies taper off into vast Plains where Dust Bowl nightmares linger. This complex place and its complex history receive the attention of the twenty authors whose nineteen essays are brought together in Kansas and the West: New Perspectives.

Editor Rita Napier evenly groups the collected articles into three temporal categories: “Native Americans, Dispossession, and Resettlement”; “Kansas in the Nineteenth Century: From ‘Bleeding Kansas’ to Modernity”; and “Twentieth-Century Kansas.” Topics range from Richard White’s “The Cultural Landscape of the Pawnees” to Thomas Frank’s “The Leviathan with Tentacles of Steel: Railroads in the Minds of Kansas Populists” and Donald Worster’s “The Dirty Thirties: A Study of Agricultural Capitalism.” Along the way, the reader encounters such diverse subjects as the Prairie Potawatomies’ resistance to allotment; ethnic German communities; segregated schools; Mexican immigration; and the restructuring of the beefpacking industry. Although arranged chronologically, these articles also hone in on certain key themes: environment; cultural adaptation; race; class; economic development; the nature of work; ethnicity; and diversity.

Rather than presenting a vision of a simple agrarian society evolving in measured steps into a more complex construct, this book’s contributors provide invaluable insight into a more subtle, uncertain, and provocative vision. As Napier writes in her astute and informative introductory essay, “Kansas history has not always been a story of progress, but careful analysis will let us distinguish more carefully between what we can praise and what we need to correct. This new knowledge has yarn of many colors with which to weave our future.”

Kansas and the West stands as an excellent example for how to go about the task of revisiting what once seemed such familiar ground, but which, upon reflection, cries out for further exploration and illumination.

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