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

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Powerful mythologies have always blocked people's understanding of the American West. This book provides important insights into this issue by juxtaposing the literatures of boosterism and reminiscence. The author reminds us that both sentiments were central to the creation of regional identity. One looked to a future where sophisticated cities and irrigated fields would replace alkali and coyotes. The other reshaped the past through stories of how hardship and sacrifice underlaid modern luxury.

With two chapters devoted to each genre, Wrobel reminds us how omnipresent these literatures were between the 1870s and the 1930s. His discussions are competent, but in the case of boosterism cover mostly familiar ground. The idea that new settlers inevitably were drawn into the promotion process in order to
protect their investments is new to me, however, as is the thought that local responses to outside criticism may have fostered initial senses of place. The reminiscences chapters conclude that voluminous, nearly unvarying stories of covered wagons and heroism are largely responsible for the frontier myth that subsequently was reinforced in movies and novels.

With only 166 pages of text and another thirty of photographs, this is a short book. Such brevity on an important and original topic should encourage a wide readership, but I found myself troubled. The points made in the initial chapters, although significant, are also simple and could be boiled down to a few pages. Wrobel then adds a somewhat tangential fifth chapter on how the presence of Chinese, Hispanic, and Indian peoples complicated the tasks of selling and remembering the region.

The book comes together in its final, sixth chapter where the author uses his earlier insights to ponder regional identity for the present and future. Here is Wrobel at his best: informed, articulate, and passionate. He notes, for example, similarities between today's and yesteryear's advertisements to buy a disappearing landscape quickly and to enjoy it without having to sacrifice any amenities. Modern residents of Oregon and Montana are also shown as similar to the old pioneers in their evocation of past simplicity in the wake of ongoing invasions of boorish Californians. Finally, Wrobel articulates the need to move sense-of-place definitions beyond static themes of whiteness and rurality. In my opinion the materials in Promised Lands would have made a wonderful essay. Stretched into a book they are bloated but still very good.

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