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Book Review: The Oregon Trail: An American Saga

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The Oregon Trail: An American Saga. By David Dary. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. xiv + 414 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, appendixes, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper..

David Dary's *The Oregon Trail* is a pleasant excursion on a well-traveled road. His book is not a trail-blazing work of the stature of such classics as Francis Parkman's *The California and Oregon Trail* (1849) and Bernard De Voto's *The Year of Decision, 1846* (1943), nor is it as erudite as John D. Unruh's *The Plains Across* (1979) nor as encyclopedic as Merrill J. Matte's *Platte River Road Narratives* (1988); however, it remains a useful introduction to the subject.

Dary's careful placement of migration on the Oregon Trail in a larger historical context is most welcome. He provides in the early chapters a useful background to events leading up to the establishment of the trail. And as he focuses on the years when traffic along the trail was heaviest, he includes references to the major political, economic, and technological developments taking place in the country.

His last chapter, "Rebirth of The Trail," explains how the trail was rediscovered in the twentieth century. At the center of that revival was Ezra Meeker, who'd traveled the road in 1852. He celebrated his earlier trip in January 1906 by retracing his steps and marking the trail. Meeker publicized his commemorative journey, and his efforts kindled a fascination with the trail in the media and among politicians, scholars, and the general public. As Dary ably demonstrates, it marked the beginning of the legendary Oregon Trail.

The author enhances his account with clear maps strategically placed and with one appendix listing historic landmarks and another listing the cutoffs from the trail and other roads. A useful glossary is included as well.

The Oregon Trail is a straightforward narrative that attempts to portray "an American saga." For the most part, Dary succeeds in presenting the heroic and sordid aspects of life along the trail and conveying the drama of travel on that road west. What is lacking is an interpretation of where fact ends and fable begins.

Trail buffs will not find any new details in Dary's account, and historians will not find any new insights. Nonetheless, casual readers will find it a useful jumping-off point for their journey, real or imaginary, on the Oregon Trail.

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