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## Review of INTO THE WEST The Story of Its People, by Walter Nugent

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# Montana Reviews

Nugent, *Into the West*  
reviewed by Frederick C. Luebke



INTO THE WEST  
The Story of Its People  
Walter Nugent

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. xxiii + 493 pp. \$35.00.

This latest book by Walter Nugent, a distinguished and prolific American historian, is a major contribution to western history. *Into the West* is about people—those who came to the West, when, and why—more than about place. Though “not driven by any thesis,” it rests on a foundation of sociodemography, not geography (p. xix). On his way into the West, Nugent focuses on population movements and the ideas that propelled them.

Nugent distills five main and inevitably overlapping motivations for movement into the West: homesteaders’ hunger for land (the agrarian myth); miners’ eagerness to exploit natural resources (the gold rush); hopes for a better quality of life (the California dream of retirees, entrepreneurs, health seekers, and hedonists); simple nostalgia (the mythology of the golden West); and the universal and very ordinary desire of immigrants to improve their material and spiritual circumstances.

A book of many virtues, *Into the West* derives special value from the author’s attention to racial and ethnic minorities in western history—Native Americans, Hispanics, blacks, and the several Asian groups (Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and Vietnamese), and their interaction with dominant or established elements in western society. European groups are not neglected, as they are in so many general histories of the West. Nugent treats questions of fecundity, mortality, gender ratios, age cohorts, and occupational structures, but he rarely resorts to tables of statistics. His generalizations are supported instead by narratives of personal experience.

Nugent is a historian, not a geographer or a demographer. His book is therefore organized chronologically. Following a fascinating introductory chapter, Nugent offers a sweep of western history to 1848, that crucial year in which the United States expanded by half. Thereafter, in blocks encompassing one or two decades, chapters are defined by economic booms or busts, droughts or depressions, the effects of war, the baby boom and its decline—all of which relate directly to population movements.

Patterns emerge. Nugent reminds us that immigrants, regardless of origin, tend to behave in certain ways. Modern Hispanic and east Asian immigrants in the West repeat behaviors common among the masses of eastern and southern Europeans who arrived in the United States

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early in the twentieth century. Fertility rates, for example, decline rapidly as immigrants assimilate in language, education, and occupation. Thus, Hmong families from rural Laos often included nine or ten children, but “their American-born children planned on only two or three” (p. 325).

This is a no-nonsense book that strips away layers of western mythology. For that reason Nugent’s story often is not pretty. He describes much misery, failure, desiccated optimism, and unfounded faith; there are also examples of greed, ignorance, prejudice, and mindless hatred. Still, Nugent is no muckraker—there are no exposés to serve sensationalist ends. His history is as much a story of successful adaptations. For many westerners that has meant adopting new strategies for economic survival and prosperity. For others it could mean out-migration, not merely from rural stretches of the Great Plains but also from rural California.

Inevitably *Into the West* is a work of synthesis based on wide reading in secondary sources. Nugent’s last chapters depend primarily upon newspapers, especially the *New York Times*. The author’s broad reach missed some books and articles one might expect to find in his bibliography. But it matters little; his analysis stands.

*Into the West* deserves a wide readership. The book is graced with a lively, informal prose style, no mean feat for a book with a story line, such as it is, based on demography. Because the later chapters break new ground, they are especially valuable. In particular, western politicians should read and heed the concluding pages, which treat “post-millennial projections.”

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