

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1995

Review of *Whiskey Peddler: Johnny Healy, North Frontier Trader* By William R. Hunt

Paul F. Sharp
University of Oklahoma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Sharp, Paul F., "Review of *Whiskey Peddler: Johnny Healy, North Frontier Trader* By William R. Hunt" (1995). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1068.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1068>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Whiskey Peddler: Johnny Healy, North Frontier Trader. By William R. Hunt. Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1993. Preface, maps, black and white illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. x + 253 pp. \$12.00 paper.

This biography successfully traces the career of an Irish immigrant whose colorful life defines the realities of pioneering while at the same time providing the stuff of Western dime novels, movies, campfire storytelling, and adventure yarns. His remarkable range of experiences as frontier soldier, whiskey trader to Canadian Indians, and finally as a major player on the Alaskan frontier gives the author an opportunity to write a fast moving history of Montana, the Northwest Territories of Canada, and Alaska.

Whiskey Peddler adds to our understanding of the pragmatic frontier entrepreneur. As a whiskey trader in western Canada, as a law officer in Chouteau County, Montana, as hotel owner, newspaper editor, and army scout, Johnny Healy is a symbol of the "rugged individualist" who captured the public imagination to become a legend in the high border country. As whiskey trader he defied the laws of God and the federal government as he corrupted the Blackfeet peoples with his "rot gut" whiskey. As a peace officer in Montana he ruled the county with an iron fist to help transform a lawless Fort Benton into a thriving commercial center at the head of navigation on the Missouri river.

Hunt adds materially to the Alaskan story by describing and analyzing Healy's role as a merchant entrepreneur. Here Healy's activities were as varied as in Montana. In the north

country he invested in transportation, merchandising, mining, fishing, and railroad promotion while also serving as a customs collector.

In this richly detailed account, laced with numerous anecdotes, Healy emerges as a persistent, pragmatic, and energetic entrepreneur whose career moved from whiskey peddler to merchant prince and then to pauper. In 1897 his numerous entrepreneurial adventures earned him the title, "King of the Klondike." In his one major effort to lead a large company, the NAT & T, he was sacked by Eastern financiers who felt Healy was "over his head."

When the Klondike fever subsided, Healy seized other opportunities to enhance his fortune through investments in gold mining, tin mining, and transportation. His enthusiasm to finance and build a tunnel under the Bering Sea to link the North American transcontinental railroads with the trans-Siberian line engaged the attention, though not the support, of President Theodore Roosevelt and financiers such as James J. Hill and John Cudahy. That Johnny Healy died a poor man is eloquent tribute to the risk for those whose expansive dreams outreached reality.

William Hunt has undertaken the difficult task of separating fact from fiction, anecdote from historical truth, and frontier exaggeration from reality. His easy style gives the biography the feel of storytelling rather than a serious biography, which it is.

PAUL F. SHARP
Department of Education
University of Oklahoma