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Review of *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* By Elliott West

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains. By Elliott West. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. x + 244 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

In one delightful volume, Elliott West offers four engaging, far-ranging essays on the Central Plains. Originally presented in 1993 as the ninth annual Calvin Horn Lectures on Western History and Culture at the University of New Mexico, these expanded essays are now available to a wider audience. The Horn lectures enabled West, a distinguished social historian, to explore some new aspects of western American history, specifically environmental and Native American studies. Interweaving secondary materials from a multiplicity of disciplines—anthropology, ecology and environmental studies, history, literature, sociology—with ample primary materials, West presents engrossing essays from which we can all benefit. He weaves an intricate fabric, often slowly unraveling long and dearly held notions about the West in general and the Central Plains in particular.

In the second essay entitled “Animals,” for example, West takes on an old and supposedly easily answered question: Why did the bison

fall to near extinction? While most readers might point to white overlanders and hunters as responsible for the falling off of the herds, West plaits evidence from ecology, zoology, Native American history, and overland pioneer history into a much fuller and convincing answer. Through a deft presentation, he reveals a web of fateful interactions: the impact of Native Americans’ increased reliance upon and hunting of bison for subsistence and trade; drought; disease among the bison introduced by Native American and white overlanders’ stock; and increased competition among white and Native peoples, their domestic animals, and bison for the Central Plains’ crucial, limited grasses and resources. At the end of the essay, he returns to that simplistic answer to discuss briefly its romantic basis: that of positing Native Americans as living in an ahistorical, static, child-like innocence and that of depicting whites (in this case, blaming greedy whites) as the sole historical actors.

The other essays—on Land, Family, and Stories—offer equally discerning analysis in which place figures prominently. West defines the Central Plains in terms of its microclimates, its political relations, its peoples, and as an object and subject of stories. Writing

from within the Central Plains and from multiple views, West ultimately gives this subregion and its various inhabitants voice. A well-crafted and elegantly written set of essays, this volume deserves wide use by the general public, students, and scholars.

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