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## Review of *Father Peter John DeSmet: Jesuit in the West* By Robert C. Carriker

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*Father Peter John DeSmet: Jesuit in the West.* By Robert C. Carriker. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. xx + 266 pp. \$24.95.

A tough-minded geophysicist friend claims that, given a choice, he would relive his life as a fur trapper during the 1830s and 40s. More than pelts, he would like to see the Great West before civilization transformed it. I doubt that my friend would ever consider being a missionary instead of a mountain man, but such a vocation would have served his exact purpose, as Robert Carriker ably describes in this highly readable biography of the Jesuit explorer Pierre-Jean DeSmet.

Born in 1801, DeSmet arrived at St. Louis in 1823, established a mission to the Potawatomi at Council Bluffs in 1838, and undertook epic overland journeys to and beyond the Rockies from 1840 to 1865. Carriker does not romanticize DeSmet's life or its physical hardships, but the awesomeness of the land and the human adventure is obvious.

It is easy to admire someone who made nineteen ocean voyages on the Atlantic and Pacific, including rounding Cape Horn, and who wandered tens of thousands of miles by foot, canoe, steamboat, and horse as far north as Columbia Lake and Edmonton, as far south as New Orleans, and as far west as Fort Vancouver. Carriker admires DeSmet, whom he treats critically and fairly in assessing the missionary's many roles: priest, explorer, author, fund-raiser, government agent, pioneer, recruiter, university and missions administrator. The author describes internal church conflicts as well as DeSmet's weaknesses and blind spots, which included an intolerance toward Protestants and Mormons, exaggeration and self-serving distortion in writing, weak management skills, and limited analytical ability.

Although DeSmet loved native people, believed in their innate goodness—even idealized them in the case of the Flatheads—and tolerated their cultures, he did not fully understand their lifeways and failed to grasp how they perceived the easy Christianity he offered them. A belief that Indians could shed their culture and become fully "civilized" in twenty years proved exceptionally naive. Most of all, with the evidence right before his eyes, DeSmet seemed to miss the greatest irony in his life: that in attempting to save the Potawatomi, Osage, Sioux, Arikara, Mandan, Kalispel, Flatheads, Blackfeet, Crow, and Spokane he himself unwittingly abetted their dispossession and destruction.

Most of us fail to see or accept our own contradictions; to expect more of DeSmet is to expect too much. The more crucial question is whether his biographer has detected ambiguities and dilemmas in a noble, admirable life. Robert Carriker has. This, coupled with thorough research and graceful writing, makes his book the best biography of Jean-Pierre DeSmet yet written.

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