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**Review of *Sixty Miles from Contentment: Traveling the Nineteenth-Century American Interior* By M. H. Dunlop**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Sixty Miles from Contentment: Traveling the Nineteenth-Century American Interior.* By M. H. Dunlop. New York: Basic Books, 1995. Illustrations, bibliography, index. x + 277 pp. \$24.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.

One of the last unexplored areas of the globe, Dunlop explains, was the American interior. Unable to make the exotic journey to unexplored areas like the polar icecaps, world travelers set out for America. What they saw—what their impressions were—is the subject of Dunlop's book. She uses 300 travel records, most written by Europeans, as representative of the travelers' impressions. The study is thematically organized around such issues as impressions of Native Americans and reactions to the food and food service of the interior; it is rich in synecdoche and benefits from Dunlop's masterful weaving together of various similar and contrasting accounts and from her own imaginative literary style. It offers historians of the Midwest and Great Plains an excellent source of original impressions of the area.

Making no grand claims about any universal impression travelers were left with after their journeys, Dunlop takes pains to emphasize the diversity of opinions among travelers. She does not always attempt to explain this diversity of opinion, however, which might have been done by paying greater attention to her travelers' personal biographies.

One uncontested view is the significance of the American democratic spirit and social egalitarianism, once again vindicating Tocqueville and confirming older historical interpre-

tations of America that underscore the absence of class consciousness. In the book's best chapter, "The Derangement of Comfort," Dunlop recounts the rarity of social distinctions, the hostility to the idea of servants (and thus their shortage), and such outrages as travelers having to sleep in the same bed. She retells the humorous story of Charles Dickens, that champion of the downtrodden, aboard an Ohio River steamship, noting that every other male passenger used the communal comb and brush while Dickens conspicuously employed his own.

Some travelers recorded the risks of deviating from the egalitarian democratic norm: "Whoever ventures to differ essentially from the mass is sure to become the object of unkind feeling . . ." Others noted the sense of social duty and personal responsibility that allowed American democracy to function. Dunlop observes that "The public matter of the interior—a controlled, class denying, good-humored public detachment—was understood by the French traveler Michel Chevalier to be both a philosophical satisfaction and an ideological comfort."

How representative the impressions of these literate, elite travelers were remains a problem the book fails to resolve. Another problem is the book's organization, which might have been tighter and more useful had the impressions of particular kinds of travelers served as its organizing principle. Economic class might have been a more useful category for explaining a traveler's impressions, but more important still might have been level of education, reasons for traveling, or simply

whether the traveler was British, which seems to be a prime indicator of snootiness. On the whole, however, Dunlop has accomplished a great deal. Learning about the history and culture of the middle of America in the nineteenth-century might well begin with this work.

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