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Review of *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West* By Richard W. Etulain

Julie Courtwright
Texas A&M University

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BOOK REVIEWS

Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West. By Richard W. Etulain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. xiii + 466 pp. Maps, photographs, suggested readings, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

In his *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West*, Richard Etulain, a self-proclaimed “radical middler,” proposes to provide a “center-of-the-road book” that tells of the complex and changeable American West without allowing heroes and villains to overwhelm the narrative. This he does remarkably well. Etulain places his text within a school of Western history, recently emerged, that emphasizes complexity over the old frontier thesis and over the more recent conquest-oriented New Western histories.

Writing a balanced history from the pre-historic landscape to the post-1980s, Etulain takes a broad view of his topic, skillfully weaving a story that includes environmental, social, political, and cultural elements. While acknowledging the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, he approaches his subject from all sides and from within the region itself rather than from the traditional east-to-west perspective. The result is a book that focuses on the West as a place, one with a long history and an incredibly diverse population.

Beyond the Missouri is a study of the whole of the region (suitable as a classroom text and as a reference for scholars and enthusiasts), but Etulain also distinguishes among the various subregions that make up the West, including the Great Plains, which he first describes as “the North Dakota-to-Texas range of states.” Thankfully leaving this awkwardness behind,

he incorporates familiar Plains subjects in his history, including the variety of Indian peoples in the region, exploration, the overland trails, ranching and farming, the Dust Bowl crisis, the growth of manufacturing during World War II, and the increasingly evident “federal footprints” in the postwar era. Adequately told (with the possible exception of including the nineteenth-century “rain follows the plow” theory in a section on twentieth-century agriculture), these subjects fit comfortably, if somewhat uneventfully, into the rest of Etulain’s narrative. The author’s purpose, however, is not to revolutionize the telling of Plains history, but to provide a balanced account, placed within the context of the larger West. This he does quite well.

Perhaps *Beyond the Missouri*’s finest moment with regard to the Great Plains is in chapter nine, where Etulain begins the familiar recitation of complaints and hardships about Plains life. This reader (an admitted Great Plains devotee) was initially annoyed at the author’s clichéd reference to the “featureless plains” (is all that space really not a spectacular feature?), but quickly forgot and forgave by the next page, when Etulain implied, accurately, that the hardships of the Plains, although certainly real enough, are often emphasized to the exclusion of all other factors. “Even though some newcomers were alienated by the flat, treeless plains, others delighted in it,” he concludes, providing more evidence of having accomplished his goal of writing a balanced and comprehensive history of the American West.

JULIE COURTWRIGHT
Department of History
Texas A&M University