

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 1999

Review of *Encyclopedia of the American West* By Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod

Jay H. Buckley

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jay_buckley@byu.edu

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



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

Buckley, Jay H., "Review of *Encyclopedia of the American West* By Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod" (1999). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1541.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1541>

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.

takings requiring a number of years to complete, they succeed or fail depending not only on accuracy but on their flexibility as reference works to interest a wide range of audiences, both as stopping or starting points for research. Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod, no strangers to undertaking large projects such as biographical dictionaries, have compiled an excellent *Encyclopedia of the American West*.

Joining Howard W. Lamar's masterful *Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (1977), now available in a revised edition (1998), the *Encyclopedia of the American West* is a major comprehensive reference work on the West. Relying on an editorial board that included public historians Gerald George and B. Byron Price, and scholars Peggy Pascoe, Martin Ridge, Hal Rothman, Vicky L. Ruiz, and Robert M. Utley, its editors also employed the expertise of nearly four hundred practitioners of western history during their five-year project.

The hefty four-volume set of nearly 2,000 pages contains some 1,700 entries, arranged alphabetically, presenting generally accepted facts and synthesizing current theories and viewpoints. Additional features make it both easily accessible and useful to the student, scholar, and general public. Volume one contains listings of all articles and authors; volume four provides a thorough index (110 pages). Hundreds of small black-and-white photographs illustrate the work. Words or ideas in articles that appear elsewhere are clearly marked, and entries appearing under different headings are cross-referenced. Finally, an ample list of suggested readings at the end of each entry directs users to traditional classics as well as recent articles and specialized monographs.

The editors' preface describes the direction the project took and the challenges it encountered. First, they defined the American West geographically as an area encompassing twenty-three states west of the Mississippi River (including Alaska and Hawaii but excluding Louisiana) and portions of the Mexican and Canadian borderlands. Next, they

Encyclopedia of the American West. 4 vols. Edited by Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod. New York: Macmillan Reference, 1996. lxxvii + 1,935 pp. Maps, photographs, index. \$375.00.

The goal of encyclopedias is to make knowledge readily and objectively available to a wide audience. Generally massive under-

resolved that the reference work ought to avoid being a battleground between traditional and New Western history but rather should embody a "truce" or balance between the two. They accomplished this by presenting the West as a place or region shaped by various cultures and geography rather than as a wave of successive frontiers. A broad range of historical figures received considerable attention. Extensive essays on cultural, political, and social topics, and on peoples (European Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans) accompanied entries on urbanization, the environment, gender, social issues, and religion.

The encyclopedia fulfills its aim of exploring a number of the less flattering aspects of western American history: "the Euro-Americans' belief in their own absolute innocence, the Westerners' treatment of the profit motive as an almost natural passion, the dominant Western social groups' propensity to turn suddenly to violence as an answer to social challenges, Western culture's addiction to racial stereotyping, and the typical Western settler's brutal handling of the environment."

Perhaps the most disappointing feature is that four contributors (editors Axelrod and Phillips and assistant editors Patricia Hogan and Candace Floyd) authored more than a fourth of the work. Also, the forty-two maps, especially those of states, generally lack detail. Readers will notice the disparity of length and numbers of entries assigned to particular topics or individuals. For example, a large number of Native American entries appear while other ethnic groups, especially European emigrants, receive fewer in comparison. Finally, since the entries generally cover a chronology extending from the "early Spanish period through the early twentieth century," the last fifty years or so of history in the American West are largely absent. No entries on contemporary historians appear, nor do items the editors felt were not unique to the West or failed to fit their chronological focus. A few of those twentieth-century

topics either briefly covered in other entries or neglected and omitted altogether include the aerospace industry, the Buffalo Commons, Crazy Horse and Mount Rushmore National Monuments, Disneyland, and FFA/FHA/4-H clubs; hydroelectricity, *Indian Country Today*, nuclear energy and nuclear waste sites, and meat packing; and individuals like Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Bush. The work would have benefitted also from an article on the physiography of the coastal, basin, mountain, Plains, and plateau regions of the American West.

Nevertheless, the entire editorial staff have done a masterful job producing this important encyclopedia. Macmillan, too, should be commended for its continued commitment to providing essential, high-quality reference works. If the entries most familiar to this reviewer are any measure, then the *Encyclopedia of the American West* fulfills its primary requirement of accuracy. It belongs on the shelves of all libraries and will serve as a standard source book on western peoples, places, and events for years to come.

JAY H. BUCKLEY
Department of History
University of Nebraska-Lincoln